THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

BY

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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UPB

TO

JAMES EARLE FRASER

AND

LAURA GARDIN FRASER

THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

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If I had not walked aimlessly up town
That evening, and as aimlessly walked back,
My glance had not encountered then, if ever,
The caps and bonnets of a singing group
That loudly fought for souls, and was at first
No more than a familiar spot of sound
And color in a long familiar scene;
And even at that, if an oblique persuasion
Had not withheld me and inveigled me
To pause, I should have passed as others did,
Never to guess that while I might have touched
him,

Fernando Nash was beating a bass drum
And shouting Hallelujah with a fervor
At which, as I remember, no man smiled.

Not having seen him for so many years,
And seeing him now almost as one not there
Save in remembrance or imagination,
I made of his identity, once achieved,
The ruin of a potential world-shaker—
For whom the world, which had for twenty years
Concealed him and reduced him, had not shaken.
Here were the features, and to some degree
The massive aggregate of the whole man,
Where former dominance and authority
Had now disintegrated, lapsed, and shrunken
To an inferior mystery that had yet
The presence in defeat. At a first view,

He looked a penitent Hercules, none too long
Out of a hospital. But seeing him nearer,
One read where manifest havoc must for years
Have been at work. What havoc, and what work,
I partly guessed; for I had known before
That he had always been, apart from being
All else he was, or rather along with it,
The marked of devils—who must have patiently
And slowly crucified, for subtle sport,
This foiled initiate who had seen and felt
Meanwhile the living fire that mortal doors
For most of us hold hidden. This I believe,
Though some, with more serenity than assurance,
May smile at my belief and wish me well.

Puzzled, I waited for a word with him;
And that was how I came to know all this

That I should not have known, so he averred,
But for a memory that survived in him
That I had never yelped at him with others,
Who feared him, and was not among the biters,
Who, in the years when he was dangerous
Had snapped at him until he disappeared
Into the refuge of remoter streets
And partly was forgiven. I was grateful—
Assuring him, as adroitly as I might,
That had he written me down among the biters,
I should have mourned his error. "Let them go;
They were so near forgotten," he said once,
Up there in his gaunt hall-room not long after,
"That memory now becomes a punishment
For nourishing their conceit with my contempt
As once I did. What music have they made
So different in futility since then

That one should hear of it? I make a music
That you can hear all up and down Broadway.
Glory to God! Mine are the drums of life—
After those other drums. I had it—once.
They knew I had it, and they hated me
For knowing just what they had. I had it—
once!"
At that his eyes glowed and his body shook,
And it was time to go. Fernando Nash,
I saw, would not be long in going farther.
The rough resentful egoist I had known
Was now a shell. The giant had been reduced;
And the old scorn that once had been his faith
Was now a sacrificial desperation.

A year before I found him in the street
Pounding a drum and shouting for the lost,

He had for a long time, from his account,
Inhabited the Valley of the Shadow—
A region where so many become so few
To know, that each man there believes himself
In his peculiar darkness more alone
Than any other. However that may have been,
Fernando Nash's darkness we may grant
Was dark enough, and as peculiar, surely,
As all those who had bitten him would have had it.
I was not one of them, though I fear now
That acquiescence was a larger part
Than he conceived in me of kindliness;
And I should not have thought him outwardly
Much given to soliciting, in those days,
Attention any softer than respect—
Which was not always, or by those who feared
him,

Conferred without a sure and small alloy
Of hate, that made the giver and gift alike
A negligible mildew to Fernando,
In whose equipment of infirmities
A place that might have held a little envy
Was overfilled with scorn. Out of his realm,
And only with a tinkler's apprehension
Of what those unproved opuses of his
Were like to do when they began to sing,
There was no reason in eternity
For me to be distressed at his assurance
That they were all immortal. Who was I,
A hewer of wood, to say that they were not,
Or to be disaffected if they should be?
Today I cannot tell you what was in them,
Nor shall tomorrow know; for they are now,
As ashes, mute as ashes. Whether he found

Their early glory to be going out,
Or whether in one last fury against fate
He made an end of them, as afterwards
He would have made an end of other relics,
I do not know. The most he ever told me
Later about them was that they were dead.
And how they died, and how much better it was
For them to be where dead things ought to be—
Adding at once, that I be not mistaken,
That he had known himself to be no liar
The while he praised them. It was not for them
That he fed scorn to envy in those days,
Nor out of them so much as out of him
That envy grew. "They knew I had it—once,"
He said; and with a scowl said it again,
Like a child trying twice the bitter taste
Of an unpalatable panacea:

"They knew I had it—once! Do you remember
What an upstanding Ajax I was then?
And what an eye I had? I scorched 'em with it.
I scared 'em; and they knew I was a giant.
I knew it, also; and if I had known
One other thing, I should have gone down then
Upon my knees for strength—I who believed
Myself to be secure. They knew a little,
But they knew nothing of what I know now.
A year before you found what's left of me,
That evening in the street, I should have said
My way was blank and ruinous to the end,
But there was more to be, Glory to God!
There was to be a more revealing end
Than that—an end that once had been for me
The bitterest end of all—and is not so.
For in the music I have heard since then

There are the drums of life. Glory to God!
I had it—once."

So much of him was gone,
That I would hear no more. All the way home,
The restive exultation in his eyes
And in his bearing, altered and subdued,
Was like that of a dead friend out of hell,
Humbled, and hardly more than half assured
Of even his respite. There may have been a giant,
If he must have it so, but where was now
The man whom I remembered and was once
Fernando Nash? So much of him was gone,
That I should never learn, from what remained,
The story of the rest—or so I thought,
All the way home. But there was more concealed

Within the shell of him than I supposed—
More than I know today; though many a time
Thereafter I went back to him again,
Till I had heard enough to make me doubt
The use of doubting, for he had it—once.
I had known that, and then for years had lost
him—
For all those years while he had crushed unripe
The grapes of heaven to make a wilder wine
Than earth gives even to giants who are to live
And still be giants. It may be well for men
That only few shall have the grapes of heaven
To crush. The grapes of heaven are golden
grapes,
And golden dregs are the worst dregs of all—
Or so Fernando surely would have said
A year before.

A year before I found him,
Pounding a drum and shouting to the street,
Fernando Nash heard clocks across the town
One midnight, and was forty-five years old;
And he was too far sundered from his faith
And his ambition, buried somewhere together
Behind him, to go stumbling back for them,
Only to find a shadowy grave that held
So little and so much. The barren room—
The same in which I sought him a year later—
Was not much larger than the iron bed
On which he sat; and all there was of music
About the place was in a dusty box
Of orchestrations for the janitor,
And in the competent plain face of Bach,
Calm in achievement, looking down at him
Like an incurious Titan at a worm,

That once in adolescent insolence
Would have believed himself another Titan.
Fernando sat with his large heavy face
Held forward in his hands and cursed his works
Till malediction was a weariness,
And all his makeshift insolence a lie
That only cravens who had trained themselves
To fight and had not fought were silly enough
To fancy for the truth. No insolence
That he remembered would have been sufficient
Without additions and foreseen betrayals
To make of him this penitential emblem
Of that which he was not. When he had called
Himself a worm, another worm turned at once
Within his heart and bit him; and just then
The candid face of one that heretofore
Had been for him as near to the divine

As any might be, and through all had remained so,
Became as if alive there on the wall,
Transfigured into living recognition,
Wherein there was much wonder and some pity,
And more regret. The Titan, it would seem,
For the first time, and ruinously too late,
And only for a moment interested,
Saw what had happened and could do no more,
Having seen, than to recede ineffably
Aloft into the distance and the dark,
Until he was as high as a large star
That shines on death and life and death in life
Indifferently. Fernando Nash at length
Arose, leaving his bed for his one chair;
And under the sick gleam of one gas-flame,
That had for years to shadowy lodgers given
More noise than light, he sat before a glass

That was more like a round malevolent eye
Filmed with too many derelict reflections,
Appraising there a bleared and heavy face
Where sodden evil should have been a stranger.

"What are you doing here? And who are you?"
He mumbled, with cloudy consciousness
Of having felt a ghostly blow in the face
From an unseemly mirrored visitor
That he had not invited. "And how long
Have you been on your way, do you suppose,
To come to this? If I remember you
As first you were anointed and ordained,
There was a daemon in you, not a devil,
Who told you then that when you heard those
drums
Of death, it would be death to follow them.

You were to trust your daemon and to wait,
And wait, and still to wait. You had it—once.
You had it then—though you had not yet heard it,
Coming as it would have to come some time,
Blown down by choral horns out of a star
To quench those drums of death with singing fire
Unfelt by man before. You knew it then.
You felt it singing down out of the sky
When you were only a small boy at school;
And you knew then that it was all for you,
For you and for the world, that it was coming.
Where is it now? It may be coming yet,
For someone else, but you do not know that;
And that was not what you were meant to know.
O, you poor toad, why could you not have waited?
Why did you have to kill yourself like this?
Why did you let the devil's retinue

That was to be a part be everything,
And so drive out your daemon till your star
Should sing unheard for you whose ears were left
Only for drums and songs of your destroyers?
And now even they are gone—all but the drums.
You knew that if you waited, they, not you,
Should cease—that they should all be hushed at
last
In that great golden choral fire of sound.
'Symphony Number Three. Fernando Nash.'
Five little words, like that, if you had waited,
Would be enough tonight, you flabby scallion,
To put you on the small roll of the mighty.
As for the other two, they're in a box
Under the bed; and they will soon be nowhere.
You do not have to mourn now over them,
For they were only ladders carrying you

Up to the half-way place from which you fell,
And should have fallen, since you were going to
fall,
A little faster, and so broken at once
Your neck. Why could you not have fallen faster
And saved yourself all this? If you had given
The devil a sign to play those drums of death
Longer and louder at about that time,
You might be now a carrion more at ease
Than you are like to be till you make haste.
What else, in God's name, are you waiting for?
And where's the use? And while I'm asking that;
Where was the use of all your prentice-years
Wherein you toiled, while others only tinkled,
Till you were master of a new machine
That only your invention could have built
Or driven? You built it and you let it rust.

A fog of doubt that a small constant fire
Would have defeated had invisibly
And imperceptibly crept into it,
And made the miracle in it that was yours
A nameless toy for the first imbecile
To flout who found it—wherefore he'll not find it.
Presently Number One and Number Two
Will be beyond all finding. Number Three
Will not be farther from his eyes tomorrow;
And they'll all be as safe together then
As we should be if we had not been born.
The circle fills itself; and there you are
Inside it, where you can't crawl out of it.
It holds you like a rat in a round well,
Where he has only time and room to swim
In a ring until he disappears and drowns.
If it be true that rats abandon ships

That sail away to sink, praise be to rats!
If you were one, you'd never find another
For shipmate. He would know you for a fool,
And therefore dangerous. You're not even a rat;
For a good rat will wait for what is coming,
Whether it comes or not. You could not wait,
Knowing that it must come. You had it—once.
You had enough of it to make you know,
And were among the sceptred of the few
In having it. But where's your sceptre now?
You threw it away; and then went wallowing
After that other music, and those drums—
Assured by more than man's authority
That all you had not then was only waiting
To make of that which once was you a torch
Of sound and fire that was to flood the world
With wonder, and overwhelm those drums of death

To a last silence that should have no death.
That would have been somewhat the way of it,
You somewhat less than eminent dead fish,
If you had waited and had been content
To let those devils and those devil-women
Beat as they would your drums and dance and
sing
And be invisible. You had followed them,
And seen and heard enough of them, God knows,
Already. Your daemon had a lenience then,
And you had not the protest of a soul
Between you and your right to stay alive;
All which was as it was. But it was so
No longer when you knew it was not so,
And that one day a bush might bloom with fire
At any trivial hour of inattention,
Whereafter your employment would have been

A toil of joy for immortality.
Your drums of death, from which it all began,
Would then have been illusions most enduring
When most entirely and divinely dead;
And you, Fernando Nash, would now have been—
But who's alive to know that you're alive
To care? Look at that burned out face of yours,
You bloated greasy cinder, and say who.
Say who's to care, and then say, if you will,
Why anyone in a world where there's a cockroach,
Should care for you. You insufficient phoenix
That has to bake at last in his own ashes—
You kicked out, half-hatched bird of paradise
That had to die before you broke your shell,—
Who cares what you would be if you had flown?
A bird that men are never to see flying,
Or to hear singing, will not hold them long

Away from less ethereal captivations;
Just as a fabulous and almighty fish
That never swam to sight will hardly be
For long the unsighted end of their pursuit.
Why do you make then such a large ado
Over such undefended evidence?
You fat and unsubstantial jelly-fish,
That even your native ocean has disowned
And thrown ashore, why should men ask or care
What else you would have been if you had
waited?
You crapulous and overgrown sick lump
Of failure and premeditated ruin,
What do you think you are—one of God's jokes?
You slunk away from him, still adequate
For his immortal service, and you failed him;
And you knew all the while what you were doing.

You damned yourself while you were still alive.
You bulk of nothing, what do you say to that?
You paramount whale of lust and drunkenness,
You thing that was, what do you say to that?"

No man so near to glory as he was once
Was ever, I fancied, quite so inglorious
As in his penance—which is here somewhat
Softened in deference to necessity—
Fernando Nash revealed himself to me
In passionate reminiscence a year later.
Occasional strokes, at least, among the many
That I had counted must have registered
Luxurious and unmerited flagellation,
Wherein abasement was akin to pride,
If not a part of it. No man so mired
As he was in his narrative, I told him,

Could have such choral gold poured down from
heaven
When he was young. But there he shook his head
In hopeless pity—not for the doomed, I saw,
But rather for the sanguine ordinary
That sees no devil and so controls itself,
Having nothing in especial to control.

"Hewers of wood," I said, "and drawers of
water
Will always in their innocence be insisting
That your enamel of unrighteousness
Is too thick to be real." In his changed eyes,
Where the old fire was gone, there was almost
The coming of a smile: "How do you know?"
He answered, asking. "What have you done to
know?

Where have you been that you should think you know?
Do you remember when I told you once
That every sleeve of genius hides a knife
That will, if necessary, carve a way
Through snakes and oxen? Most that I said then
Has gone with all the rest, but I keep this
As a memorial of my retribution.
I wonder if a notion has yet seized you
To bury the keenest sword you ever saw
For twenty years in mud, and then go back
To find what may be left of it. If not,
You need not. Save your curiosity
Two decades of unprofitable conjecture,
And look at me. Look at Fernando Nash,—
The heir-apparent of a throne that's ashes,

The king who lost his crown before he had it,
And saw it melt in hell."

When he had ceased
I could almost have heard those drums of death
Pounding him on to a defeated grave,
Which, had I not by chance encountered him
Beating another drum for the Lord's glory
There in the street, would have been no man's
grave,
Like that of one before him who still wears
The crown he could not lose. I thought of him,
Whose tomb was an obscure and stormy legend,
Sure of how little he had cared for that—
And how much less would this man here have cared
Whether he found a nameless grave, or no grave,
So long as he had left himself alive

Behind him in a world that would have loved him
Only the more for being out of it.
That long orchestral onslaught of redemption
Would have exonerated flesh and folly
And been his everlasting epitaph—
Which time would then have read as variously
As men are various in their ways and means
Of reading. That would have cancelled everything,
And all his earthly debts—or left him willing
To pay them peradventure as they might
Or must be paid. But they had run too long.
His birthright, signed away in fettered sloth
To the most ingenious and insatiable
Of usurers, had all vanished; and the more
He might have been a king, the more their greed
Would mock him and his tatters, and abase him;

And his vituperative temporizing
Over a soul in rags would mend no holes.
"But there's a crown that even the lowliest
May learn to wear," he said. "Glory to God!"
And his eyes glittered with an icy joy
That made me hope that he was wearing it.
"Of course we can't forget," he said in answer
To doubt that in my silence may have spoken;
"Yet there is much that we may leave behind,
And there is always more if we go on."

In marking after that the accuracy
Of his minute recount, I found it hard
Not to believe that he remembered all—
Save that which of itself was everything,
Or once had been so. There before the mirror,
That bitter midnight when he heard the clocks,

There was not much forgetting; and since then
Only one year was gone. Before that glass
He must have sat for more than a long hour,
Hurling the worst of his vocabulary
At his offending image. "Now you have learned
A part of what you are," he told his face,
"And you may say whatever occurs to you
As an addendum. You deficient swine,
Where do you see the best way out of it?
You are not crazy enough to cut your throat;
You are not solid enough to shoot yourself.
There's always water, but you don't like that;
And you're not sure enough of what might happen
If you should inadvertently have swallowed
A few small pills. But there's another way—
A longer and a more monotonous one,
Yet one that has no slight ascendency

Over the rest; for if you starve to death,
Maybe the God you've so industriously
Offended in most ways accessible
Will tell you something; and if you live again
You may attain to fewer discrepancies
In less within you that you may destroy.
That's a good way for you to meet your doubt,
And show at the same time a reverence
That's in you somewhere still." And I believe,
Though he may well then have believed in nothing
More real than a defective destiny,
That it was in him somewhere, as he said.
There was a fervor in his exceration
That was not only drama; though I question
Whether I should have found him and his drum
That evening a year after, in the street,
If he had not gone farther, while he starved,

Into the valley—which had for twenty years
Already beguiled and held him. What had been
Without this uncompanioned expiation,
I do not know, and I might never have known.
The shape of one more foiled obscurity
Might some time as a cadaver have ensured
A massive and unusual exhibition
Of God's too fallible image—and no more.
Though some had wondered idly, and they might,
Why the defeated features of a giant
Should have been moulded so imperiously
To be the mask of frailty in oblivion,
None would have rated such a scrapped utensil
As more than common, or uncommon, waste;
None would have guessed what violent fire had
once,
In such a cracked abandoned crucible,

Fused with inseparable obscure alloy
Celestial metal, which would else have been
The fabric of a seething instrument
That might have overflowed with other fire
Brought falling from ethereal distances.

It might, I say, cleaving inveterately
To my conviction that in this man's going
More went than when in Venice went the last
Authentic wizard, who in his house of sound
Hears not the siege of Time. Failing a way
To prove that one obscure evangelist,
Beating a drum and shouting for the Lord,
Not only might have been (to fill again
That weary sieve with wine) but was in fact
A giant among fewer than half your fingers
Of Jubel's clan,—and surely having given

Credulity, dismayed imaginably
In retrospect, extenuating warrant
To hang itself conveniently at leisure,—
Only Fernando Nash's narrative
Will now avail me for the confirmation
Of more, I fear, than the confirmable—
As he would have foretold. Reverting quaintly
And incompatibly with his arrogance
To the weak stings of his inferiors,
And even while dying, he smiled. "Poor souls,"
he said,
"That are born damned, although they may be
feared
May be forgiven, though hated, and then hanged;
Whereas my early colleagues, had they known
How soon and surely I was to damn myself,
Not only would have ceased their fearing me,

But would have loved me—seeing that I was
doomed.
That midnight—when I cursed myself so long—
Roundly and rightly, be it well understood—
There came a few revealing memories
That set me then to wondering just what soft
And anaesthetic language of affection
They would have brought for me if they had
known
How far I was from all that formerly
Had for so long offended and oppressed them.
Poor children!—and they might all have been
happy
If in the place of misapplied creation
A more discriminate wisdom had supplied
Discrimination—and some humility
Before God's few that are in spite of us

Surviving, somehow." And all this to me
Was not quite so irrelevant as to others
It may at first appear; for the same thought
Pursued me always in those other days
When I had harmonized ingeniously
Some brief and unoffending cerebration
Which, had it been one, would have been a song.
To some persuasion sharper than advice
I must have yielded slowly and at last
Let fall my lyre into the fearsome well
Of truth, hearing no protest from below;
Thereby surviving bitterness to indite
This tale of one who foundered in a slough
More fearsome, and lost there a mightier lyre.

He was not humble, this Fernando Nash;
Yet while he may have ministered on occasion

To a discreet humility in others,
I doubt if in the scorn he flung to us,
Mostly in silence, his preoccupation
Saw crumbs of any nurture less assuaging
Than wholesome and unfrosted honesty;
Albeit his arrogance may have merited
The few vindictive nippings that amazed
As much as they annoyed, and would have seemed
Allegiance, had their negligible venom
Been isolated from another virus,
Which later was to be a leprosy
Of self-contempt attending revelation.

When he had heard the last stroke of those clocks,
And called himself again the last hard name
That his abundant lexicon released,
He tore those two initial symphonies

Into as many pieces of oblivion
As he had reasons, or believed he had,
After those empty years, for their extinction.
"They were so 'temerarious' and 'exotic'
When they were written twenty years ago,
He said, "that all who saw them laughed at them—
Not seeing with me that they would be today
About as temerarious and exotic
As Händel's hat. They were good harbingers,
But were they living they would not be mine;
They were not what it was that I was doing
The while I did them. Many, if they were theirs,
Would eat their ears for joy, but they're not theirs,
Or mine. Glory to God, they're nowhere now.
They were not mine; they were not yet the vintage;

Though I should have enjoyed, when I was young,
The taste of them. But they were not the wine
To fill my cup, and now it doesn't matter."

There was for some time an obscurity
For me in such a reasoning, but I learned,
And I have striven loyally to believe
That he did well—sure that he did not well
In going down those dark stairs again that night
For the beginning of a last debauch
That was to be a prelude, as he put it,
Wincing in reminiscence, for a fugue
Of ravening miseries and recriminations
Assembling in remorseful exposition
That was to be remorseless and infernal
Before they were devouring one another
In a malicious fantasy more infernal,

And richer in dissonance and involution
Than all his dreams together had heretofore
Aspired or dared to be. When halfway down
The second of those four forbidding stairways,
He heard those drums again, and on his face
He felt with more resentment than alarm
A touch of warning, like a chilly wind
Within a tomb. "You are too late," he said,
Holding his heavy jaws harder together;
"And you have come too many times before."
Then he went grimly down and out of doors,
And was alone there in a lonely street
That led where soon he might not be so lonely,
Or so severe in his particulars.

After three weeks that would have relegated
A village blacksmith or a stevedore

Of mortal average to a colder sleep
Than has a waking, he awoke one day
Late in the afternoon, miraculously
In bed again and wondering, as before,
How this time he had got there. Looking up,
He met the face of Bach upon the wall,
Who bowed at him, gravely but not unkindly;
And he, not yet alive to what was coming,
And not to be defective in attention
To a great master, bowed acknowledgment;
Whereat the salutations were repeated,
And there was a preparatory silence,
Heavy with strangeness and expectancy,
Which would have been a monitory dread—
But for the master's nod of satisfaction
And interest in the coming through a keyhole
Of a slow rat, equipped with evening dress,

Gold eye-glasses, and a conductor's wand,
Soon followed by a brisk and long procession
Of other rats, till more than seventy of them,
All dressed in black and white, and each of them
Accoutred with his chosen instrument,
Were ranged in order on the footworn carpet
That lay between Fernando and the door.
Having no chairs, they stood erect and ready,
And having made obeisance to the master
Upon the wall, who signified his pleasure,
And likewise to the man upon the bed,
They played with unforeseen solemnity
The first chords of the first rat symphony
That human ears had heard. Baffled and scared,
Fernando looked at Bach, who nodded slowly,
And, as he fancied, somewhat ominously;
And still the music sounded, weird but firm,

And the more fearful as it forged along
To a dark and surging climax, which at length
Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter
That rose above a groaning of the damned;
And through it all there were those drums of death,
Which always had been haunting him from childhood.
Without a formal ending, or any sign
That there was ever to be an end, the rats
Danced madly to the long cacophony
They made, and they made faces at Fernando
The while they danced—till one of them, the leader,
Bowed mockingly, and vanished through the keyhole,
As he had come; and after him went others,

Each with a leering courtesy as he went,
Till more than seventy of them disappeared,
Leaving their auditor lying there alone
In a cold sweat, while his impassive master
Frowned, shook his head, and was again a picture.

Fernando Nash, deploring afterwards
This innovation of orchestral rats
As a most arbitrary intermezzo
Between the sordid prelude that was over
And the infernal fugue that was to come,
Smiled wearily, and shrugged his heavy shoulders,
Like one who would be glad to say no more,
Yet must relate the rest to somebody
Before he died. Somebody might believe him;
And it was I, who had not bitten him
(Achilles' heel was never to be cured),

Who might, if anyone might, believe him now,
And say to others that he was not mad
Through that incessant week of lonely torture
Which no food would have eased, and through the
days
That followed while he starved indomitably,
With a cold hope that his long-punished heart
Would after time be still. Day after day,
And endless night following endless night,
There were those miseries and recriminations
Devouring one another but never dead,
Until one afternoon he lay remembering
The day when those unusual visitors
Had made a more unusual music for him,
And having made it mocked him and departed.
Again he looked up at the face of Bach,
Considering wearily, with a bleak regret

How far those features in their dusty frame
Were now from seeing that there was in this world
So frail a relic as Fernando Nash,
And how much farther still they were from caring,
With more than common care, could they have seen
him.
Could they have seen him they would not have
known
What fires had burned in that cadaverous ruin
Below them, or what hopes, or what remorse,
Or what regret. For a long time he lay
Aware of action hardly in a finger,
But with a coming wonder of surprise
For a new clearness which had late begun
To pierce forbidden chambers long obscured
Within him, and abandoned, being so dark
And empty that he would not enter them—

Fearful of what was not there to be found
Should he go there to see. They might be dark,
But folly that made them so had kept them so,
Like an indulgent slayer who binds a wound
That he has washed wtih a lethargic poison,
And waits at ease with his malignity
For stagnant fury to accumulate
A mortal sloth within—and in so far
As that was in a manner merciful,
Though now it seemed there was to be an end
Of even that mercy. After a grateful darkness,
There was to be the pain of seeing too clearly
More than a man so willing to see nothing
Should have to see.

Still motionless, he lay there
Laboring to persuade a lying hope

That this new clarity was the light that comes
Before the night comes, and would not last long—
Yet knowing that it was not. Like shining grain,
Long fouled and hidden by chaff and years of dust
In a dark place, and after many seasons
Winnowed and cleaned, with sunlight falling
on it,
His wits were clear again. He had no power
To use them, and at first repudiated
The faintest wakening flicker of any wish
For use of any such power. But a short fight
Found his whole fragile armor of negation
So tattered that it fell away from him
Like time-worn kingly rags of self-delusion
At the rough touch of the inevitable—
Till he confessed a rueful willingness
To reason that with time and care this power

Would come, and coming might be used. He
smiled
And closed his eyes, finding an awkward humor
In such an unforeseen enfranchisement
From such a long and thwarting servitude.
A calm that all his life had been a stranger
To the confusions that were born with him
Composed and overpowered him as he felt,
Enveloping and persuading body and brain
Together, a cool relief as if warm wings
Were in the air above him. So there he lay,
Without a motion or a wish to move,
And with a sense of having only to rise
And give his hands to life. A grateful shame
For all his insults to the Holy Ghost
That were forgiven was like an anodyne
Laid on a buried wound somewhere within him,

Deeper than surgeons go; and a vast joy,
Which broke and swept and covered him like a sea
Of innocence, leaving him eager as a child
That has outlived experience and remembers
Only the golden moment as it flows,
Told him in silence that was more than speech
That after passion, arrogance and ambition,
Doubt, fear, defeat, sorrow and desperation,
He had wrought out of martyrdom the peace
That passeth understanding. Still he lay there
Smiling to think how soon those burrowing teeth
Which he had felt within him for so long
Would cease their famished gnawing at his heart,
Which after all the many prolonged assaults
It had survived was toiling loyally,
With only an uncertain fire to drive it;

And still he would not move. There would be
time
For all things in their order. He was hungry—
Hungry beyond a longer forced endurance,
But in this new unwillingness not to live,
No longer forced, there was a gratefulness
Of infinite freedom and humility,
After a bondage of indignant years
And evil sloth; and there was in this calm,
Whch had unlooked for been so long in coming,
A balanced wealth of debts and benefits
Vaster than all ambition or achievement.
Hereafter it would be enough to serve,
And let the chosen shine.

So there he lay,
Luxuriating vaguely on the moment

When he should rise and with a blessed effort
Go down those shadowy stairs again for food;
And if in his prevision of that moment
He had not lain so long awaiting it,
Those drums of death might opportunely then
Have stayed an hour the sound of their approach,
Throbbing as always, and intolerably,
Through stifling clouds of sound that hid, like
flames,
Tumultuous and elusive melodies,
Now for so long imprisoned as no longer
To be released. Hearing them first, and faintly,
For once and for once only without flinching,
He smiled and sighed. Let others, if they must,
Hear them and follow them. He was at peace
With them for the first time in recollection,
And willingly for the future would remain so.

At last alive, it was enough to serve,
And so to be content where God should call
him;
But there must be no haste. His fires were low,
And too much fuel might yet extinguish them.
At first he must be frugal with his coals,
If only for the peril of too much comfort
Given at once, and without more atonement.
So arrogant in his new humility
Was he becoming, and so chary was he
Of exultation, that to break his fast
With no excess of zeal he planned a fare
That would have saddened Simeon on his pillar;
And he might soon have been in search of it,
Had not another silence, like a blow
That somehow stunned him to clairvoyant awe,
Held him as if mysterious hands had bound him

With cords he could not see. Now he could hear
Those drums again, and they were coming nearer,
Still muffled within the same unyielding cloud
Of sound and fire, which had somewhere within it
A singing flame that he might not for long
Endure, should such a mocking hour as this
Be the one hour of all when after years
Of smouldering it should leap at him and scorch
him.
He felt his fingers clutching hungrily
At nothing, as the fingers of one drowning
Would clutch at seaweed floating where he sank;
And he could feel the pounding of those drums
Like iron upon the fibre of his brain.
His feeble heart was leaping, and a cold
Invisible hand was heavy on his throat—
As if in mercy, if it need be so,

To strangle him there before he knew too soon
What he must know too late.

Now it was fear,
Not peace, that falling on him like a wave,
Covered and overwhelmed him; it was fear,
Not peace, that made him cold and left him trembling
After the cold had passed. The coming drums
Were like the vanguard of a Juggernaut
Approaching slowly through a rolling cloud
Of fiery sound that was anon to burst
And inundate him with an ecstacy
Of mad regret before those golden wheels
Behind should crush him. He could only wait,
Therefore, and in his helplessness be seared
With his own lightning. When the music leapt

Out of that fiery cloud and blinded him,
There would be recognition for a moment,
And then release. So his prophetic fancy,
Smiting him with deceit, foresaw the blow,
Not seeing what other shafts of doom and mercy
There are from which an injured God may choose
The one or many that in his exigence
His leisure may affect. Seldom it is
The mightier moments of necessity
That we can see are coming come to us
As we have seen them. Better or worse for us,
Anticipation waits upon surprise;
And though Fernando Nash in his exhaustion
Prayed now for that cold hand upon his throat
To close and have it over, no cold hand
Was there to close. Now there was nothing for
him

But to lie still and hear those coming drums,
Muffled as always in a smoky cloud
Of burning sound that in a moment more
Would burst above him into flaming rain
That once he would have welcomed on his knees,
Unspeakably; and so he might have done
Could he have waited with his inner doors
Unbarred to the celestial messengers
Who may have come and gone a score of times,
Only to find again, and still again,
That he was absent on another journey
Into the dismal valley of the shadow
That was to be his home. But that was over.
They had not found him then. He had not
waited.
Failing a willingness to be assured
That in so doing he would have left by now

The worst of a light burden far behind him
And found the rest to be Olympian gold,
He had impawned it all for mouldy pottage.

Telling me that, he sighed and shut his teeth,
And with a mortal smile shook his large head
At me before he went back to those drums.
They were not going to sound, as it appeared,
Their long approach for ever, but were soon
To cease, and only intermittently
Be heard again till choral gold came down
Out of a star to quench and vanquish them
With molten glory. Trembling there alone,
He knew that there would now be falling on him
The flaming rain he feared, or the one shaft
Of singing fire that he no longer feared—
At which that hand might close upon his throat

Till in oblivion there might then be peace;
And so at first there was—if there be peace
In the complete oblivion of achievement.

Instead of bursting as he prayed it might,
And ending him with one destroying blast
Of unendurable fulfilment, slowly
And imperceptibly that cloud of sound
Became a singing mist, which, having melted,
Revealed a fire that he had always felt,
But never known before. No lightning shaft
Of blinding and immediate dissolution
Was yet impending: there was only joy,
And a vast wonder that all this had been
So near him for so long. Smiling and still,
He listened gratefully. It had come at last;
And those far sent celestial messengers

That he had for so long a time denied
Had found him now. He had offended them,
He had insulted and forsaken them,
And he was not forsaken. They had come,
And in their coming had remembered only
That they were messengers, who like himself
Had now no choice; and they were telling him
this
In the last language of mortality,
Which has no native barrier but the grave.
Now it was theirs to sing and his to wear
The glory, although there was a partnership
Somewhere that a surviving grace in him
Remembered; for though the star from which they
came
Shone far within the dark infinity
That was himself, he had not made it shine—

Albeit he may have wrought more notably
Than might another for its extinguishment.

But there was time for not much more of that
Than a bewildered smile of acquiescence.
The quivering miracle of architecture
That was uprising lightly out of chaos,
And out of all the silence under time,
Was a gay temple where the Queen of Life
And her most loyal minions were protracting
Melodious and incessant festival
To the least lenient of divinities.
Joy, like an infinite wine, was everywhere,
Until it proved itself at last a languor,
Now less engrossed with festive pageantry
Than with an earth-born sensuous well-being
Which in the festive pageant was divine.

Of all the many of those who danced and sang
And celebrated, there was none to note
A silent entrance of the most abhorred
And oldest of all uninvited strangers—
A lean and slinking mute with a bassoon,
Who seized attention when a languid hush
Betrayed a perilous rift of weariness
Where pleasure was not joy, and blew a tune
Of hollow triumph on a chilly reed
From which all shrank. The tumult after that
Was an unprized expenditure of beauty
Awaiting doom. It was awaiting also
The faint approach of slow, infernal drums
That were not long in coming, bringing with them
A singing horde of demons, men and women,
Who filled the temple with offensive yells
And sang to flight the frightened worshippers.

Fearing to think, he lay as one secure
So long as he lay motionless. If he moved
It might be only to plunge down again
Into a more chaotic incoherence
And a more futile darkness than before.
There was no need of moving, and no need
Of asking; for he knew, as he had known
For years, unheard, that passionate regret
And searching lamentation of the banished,
Who in abandoned exile saw below them
The desecrated lights of a domain
Where they should walk no more. Inaudible
At first, he knew it only as a presence
Intangible, but he knew that it was there;
And as it went up slowly to the stars
Carrying all the sorrow of man with it,
He trembled that he should so long have been

So near to seizing immortality.
Well, here it was. And while he might have died
If it had ceased, he would have been as one
Who cared no more, having had everything,
Where there was no more caring. But he knew
That he was not yet dead, and that the rest
Would soon be coming. When the voices fell,
He knew that through them he should hear those
drums
Again, but he was not afraid of them.
They were his drums, and the far sound of riot
Below there in the gloom was also his.
It was all his to give. "Poor fool," he thought;
"Praise God you are a fool, and call it yours."
And he lay tranquil through another silence.

Though he condemned the specious tyranny

Of illustrations and explicit schemes,
He kept in his creative charnel house
More pictures hidden of the dead and dying
Than men should see; and there were these among
them,
Which he submitted once, reluctantly,
As to a loyal friend who would forgive them,
And then forget. Yet I remember now
That in the place of languid folly flown
To mourn apart, bereft of its illusions,
The desolation of its realities,
There woke amid the splendors that were lost
A frantic bacchanale of those usurpers,
Who in affronting life with evil rites
Of death, knew not themselves to be the dead—
In false authority mistaking riot
And scorn for power, and hell for paradise.

Intoxicated by their swift invasion
Whereafter conquest was an easy trifle,
And hating the magnificence they cursed,
Seeing not the beauty or the use of it,
They soiled with earthy feet the shining floor
Flinging the dregs of their debaucheries
From crystal cups against the gleaming walls
Of Life's immortal house. Too ignorant
Of where they were to be afraid to know,
They shrieked and sang in shrill delirium
With vicious ecstasy for louder drums—
Till, crowning insolence with infamy,
They must have wearied God—who, pitying them,
Smote with avenging trumpets into silence
All but those drums of death, which, played by Death
Himself, were beating sullenly alone.

They ceased, and after stillness in which time
And space, together perishing, were no more
To him than indecisions that were gone,
Far off there was a murmur and a stirring
Of liberation, and a marching hymn
Sang of a host returning. All the banished
Who had been driven from the house of life
To wander in the valley of the shadow
Were sounding as they came in chastened order
The praise of their deliverance and return.
A singing voice that gathered and ascended
Filled the vast dome above them till it glowed
With singing light that seemed at first eternal,
But was at first not so. There were those drums
Again, to frustrate with a last intrusion
The purifying and supreme festival
Of life that had returned and in its house

Was daring to be free. But freedom wavered
Out of the voices that were praising it;
And while it wavered, the lean hand of Death
Beat with a desperate malevolence,
More sinister in its evil emptiness
Than when that carnal chorus of the dead,
With corybantic and infatuate glee
Had howled it out of hearing—till once more
There were those golden trumpets, and at last
There was that choral golden overflow
Of sound and fire, which he had always heard—
And had not heard before. Now it had come,
And had not gone. Nothing had gone that came.
All he had known and had not waited for
Was his; and having it, he could not wait now.
With blinding tears of praise and of exhaustion
Pouring out of his eyes and over his cheeks,

He groped and tottered into the dark hall,
Crying aloud for God, or man, or devil,
For paper—not for food. It may have been
The devil who heard him first and made of him,
For sport, the large and sprawling obstacle
They found there at the bottom of the stairs.

A fortnight after that, Fernando Nash
Lay contemplating with a special envy
A screen between him and another bed
That would anon be vacant. For some time,
So he had learned, the probabilities
Had seen for him a similar departure,
But seeing indifferently at the last hour
That some residual and peculiar service
Awaited the survival of as much
As was remaining of him to survive,

Had left him and abandoned him again
To life. The fire of personality,
Still glowing within him, drew mysteriously
From those assisting at his resurrection
A friendly patience, and a sort of wonder
That wore a laughing kindness. With a lesion
Like his there would be no more golden fire
Brought vainly by perennial messengers
For one that would no longer recognize them,
Or know that they had come. There were somewhere
Disfigured outlines of a glory spoiled
That hovered unrevealed and unremembered,
But they were like to those of blinding jewels
Wrought beyond earth to value beyond earth,
To be defaced and hammered valueless
By a sick idiot, and insanely sunk

In darker water than where ships go down
Hull-crushed at midnight. When he told me that,
He may have had a vision of himself
In his last, starless plunge. "Make a swift end
Of what I leave behind," he said to me.
"Burn me to ashes; and when that is done,
Take me somewhere to sea and let me sink,
And fear not for my soul. I have found that,
Though I have lost all else. All but those drums;
And they are but the last hope of the devil.
Mine are the drums of life—and they are mine.
You may not like them. All I ask of you
Is to believe me when I say to you
That what I had, I had. It was no dream
That followed me so long, and found me only
To make of me a child that should henceforth
Go into streets and beat the drums of life.

I make a joyful noise unto the Lord,
But I know it's a noise, and the Lord knows it—
Just as he knows that I have told to you
Only the truth, and that I had it—once.
Fool as I was and remnant as I am,
My prayer will be to you that you forget me,
If in your memory there survive a doubt
That I was less than you believed I was
Till I was chastened. For I swear to you
That as I knew the quality, not slight,
Of a young harvest that I would not save,
I know that in the fields where kings have been
Before me there was never found by them
A sheaf more golden than the grain I lost
When the Lord smote my field that afternoon.
I am not telling you this to salve a bruise,
For now the bruise is healed. I shall go lame

Because of it, but the Lord's ways are strange,
And I am not to suffer; and I believe
The reason for this is that I have not lied.
I have not lied to Him in praising Him,
Nor more to you in praising what He gave me
And in his wisdom took away again.
We cannot measure what the world has lost
Until we know the gauge the builders use
Who made it. All we know about the world
For certain is that it appears to be.
And in so far as I am sure of that
So am I sure that I was once as much
As you believed and others feared I was.
I have not drugged a clamoring vanity
With lies that for a little while may seem
To sweeten truth. There was no need of that;
And God knows now that there is less than ever.

Now I can beat my drum and let those drums
Of death pound as they will. Once, for an hour,
I lived; and for an hour my cup was full
With wine that not a hundred, if a score,
Have tasted that are told in history.
Having it unconfirmed, I might be mad
Today if a wise God had not been kind,
And given me zeal to serve Him with a means
That you deplore and pardonably distrust.
The dower of ignorance is to distrust
All that it cannot feel, and to be rich
In that which it has not. I can be rich
In all that I have had, and richer still
In this that I have now. Glory to God!
Mine are the drums of life, and though I wait
For no more messengers—or for none save one,
Who will be coming soon—I had it, once.

Not more than once or twice, and hardly that,
In a same century will another have it,
To know what I have lost. You do not know.
I've made for you only a picture of it,
No worse or better than a hundred others
Might be of the same thing—all mostly trash.
But I have found far more than I have lost
And so shall not go mourning. God was good
To give my soul to me before I died
Entirely, and He was no more than just
In taking all the rest away from me.
I had it, and I knew it; and I failed Him.
I did not wait."

"You could not wait," I told him,
"Instead of moulding you to suit the rules,
They made you mostly out of living brimstone,

And set you in a somewhat fiery world
Not to be burnt." But there he shook his head
And looked at me as he had looked before,
Like one who was a little sorry for me.
I had made several entrances already
With my determinism, and always failed.
He would have none of it. He was to blame,
And it was only right that he should lose
What he had won too late. "Why pity me?"
He asked, strangely, "You see that I'm content.
I shall not have to be here very long,
And there's not much that I may do for God
Except to praise Him. I shall not annoy you,
Or your misguided pity, with my evangel,
For you must have yours in another dress.
I shall not ask if you believe me wise
In this that I am doing. I do not care.

I'll only ask of you that you believe
What I have told you. For I had it—once."

To each his own credulity, I say,
And ask as much. Fernando Nash is dead;
And whether his allegiance to the Lord
With a bass drum was earnest of thanksgiving,
Confusion, penance, or the picturesque,
Is not the story. There was in the man,
With all his frailties and extravagances,
The caste of an inviolable distinction
That was to break and vanish only in fire
When other fires that had so long consumed him
Could find no more to burn; and there was in him
A giant's privacy of lone communion
With older giants who had made a music
Whereof the world was not impossibly

Not the last note; and there was in him always,
Unqualified by guile and unsubdued
By failure and remorse, or by redemption,
The grim nostalgic passion of the great
For glory all but theirs. And more than these,
There was the nameless and authentic seal
Of power and of ordained accomplishment—
Which may not be infallibly forthcoming,
Yet in this instance came. So I believe,
And shall, till admonition more disastrous
Than any that has yet imperilled it
Invalidates conviction. Though at first,
And many a time thereafter, my persuasion
May well have paused and halted, I believe
Today that all he told me for the truth
Was true—as I believed him long ago
To be the giant of his acknowledgment.

Crippled or cursed or crucified, the giant
Was always there, and always will be there.
For reasons less concealed and more sufficient
Than words will ever make them, I believe him
Today as I believed him while he died,
And while I sank his ashes in the sea.